

**PAPERS AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
SIXTEENTH GENERAL MEETING OF THE  
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION  
HELD AT LAKE PLACID, N.Y.,  
SEPTEMBER 17-22, 1894**

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## CONFERENCE OF LIBRARIANS.

*LAKE PLACID, SEPT. 17-22, 1894.*

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT, J. N. LARNED, SUPERINTENDENT OF  
THE BUFFALO LIBRARY.

IT was my misfortune to be absent from the meeting at which you did me the honor to elect me to this place, and I had no opportunity, either to give my advice against that action, or to thank you for the distinction with which it clothes me. The advice I would have given is now belated; but my thanks have lost no warmth by the delay, and I pray you to accept them with belief in their sincerity. At the same time I shall venture to draw from the circumstances a certain claim upon your generosity. If it happens to me to be tripped in some of those tangles of procedure which, in such meetings as this, await the stumbling feet of an untrained presiding officer, be good enough to remember the warning I would have given you if I had had opportunity.

We are gathered for the sixteenth meeting of the American Library Association, in the eighteenth year of its existence. Our league of the libraries is young; its history is unpretentious; but it is the history of a movement of higher importance to the world than many others that have marched with trumpets and drums. Eighteen years ago, the conception of the Library militant, of the Librarian as a moving force in the world, of the Librarian as a missionary of literature, was one which a few men only had grasped; but with which those few had already begun the doing of a revolutionary work. To-day such ideals are being realized in most corners of the American republic. The last generation, and the generations before the last, were satisfied with the school as an agent of popular education. In our time we have

brought the library to the help of the school, and the world is just opening its eyes to perceive the enormous value of the reinforcement that is gained from this new power.

And the discovery has come none too soon; for a desperate need of more and stronger forces in the work of popular education is pressing on us. If we reflect on the social conditions of the present day, and review a little the working of the ferments in civilized society during a few years last past, we shall marvel, I think, at the timeliness of the movement which brings the public library, just now, to the front of action among the instruments and agencies of popular education. It is our fortune, good or ill as we may regard it, to be unmistakably passing through one of the greater crises of human history. In the last century, modern democracy got its political footing in the world. Its birth was older, and it had been cradled in divers nursing-places, Swiss, Dutch, English, and New English; but last century it stepped into political history as the actor of the leading part; as the sovereign of the future, mounting his throne. From the moment it came on the stage, all wise men knew that its need above every other need was education. They made haste, in our country, to build school-houses and to set the school-master at work; seeing plainly that all they might hope for and strive for in the future would depend on the intelligence that could be put into the brain of this omnipotent sovereign who had risen to rule the world.

Well, the schools and the school-masters

served their purpose reasonably well for a season. Democracy was fairly equipped with a spelling-book and a quill-pen for the duties and responsibilities of a simple, slowly-moving time. The mass of its members, the every-day people of the farm and the shop, read the pamphlets and the weekly gazettes of their day, and were gently drawn, with unconfused minds, into one or the other of two straightly opposed political parties which sought their votes. If they lacked knowledge, there was a certain ingenuousness in their character which paid respect to the opinions of men who had more. If blundering in politics occurred, it was blundering leadership, for the most part, and more easily corrected than perversity in the ranks. So the reign of democracy was successful enough while society kept the simpler state.

But that simpler state is gone. We who are beyond middle age may say that we have seen it disappear. We have witnessed a miraculous transformation of the earth and of the people who dwell on it. We have seen the passing of Aladdin, who rubbed his magical electric lamp as he went, calling Afreets from the air to be the common servants of man. A change has been wrought within fifty years that is measureless, not only in itself, but in its effects on the human race. The people who whisper in each other's ears across a continent; who know at noon-time in Nebraska what happened in the morning at Samarcand; the people to whom a hundred leagues are neighborhood, and a thousand but easy distance; for whom there is little mystery left on the face of the earth, nor anything hidden from their eyes; these people of our day are not in the likeness of the men and women who ambled horseback or rode in coaches from town to town, and who were content with a weekly mail. The fitting and furniture of mind that would make a safe member of society and a good citizen out of the man of small horizons, who lived the narrower life of a generation or two ago, are perilously scant for these times.

It is true that all the wonderful quickening of life which has occurred carries something of education in itself, and that men learn even by living under the conditions of the present day; but the learning caught in that way is of the dangerous kind. It is the delusive

knowledge of the surface of things; the deceitful lore which breeds mischievous beliefs and makes them fanatical. It goes but a little way, if at all, toward the saving of society, as against the unrest, the discontent, the desire, which torment such an age of revolution as ours.

And the threatening fact is this: that ignorant opinions have acquired at the present day a capacity for harm enormously increased over that of the elder times. They share the magnified potency that is given to all things, good or ill, by the science of the modern man. Its million tongues are lent to them for propagation; but that is a matter of small seriousness compared with the boundless ease of combination which it offers to them at the same time. It is in that appalling facility of alliance and organization, which present conditions have given to men and women of every class and character, for every kind of aim and purpose, that the greatest peril of society lies in our day. A peril, that is to say, so long as society has no assurance that the leagues and confederacies formed within its bosom will be prevailingly well instructed and intelligently controlled.

As a serious danger this is something quite new. It has come upon us within recent years. I can remember a state of things in which it was difficult for a man in common life to join himself with other men, much beyond his own neighborhood, in any effectual way, excepting as he did it on the lines of an old political party or an older church. But, to-day, leagues, unions, federations, associations, orders, rings, form themselves among the restless, unstable elements of the time as easily as clouds are formed in the atmosphere, and with kindred lightning flashes and mutterings of thunder. Any boldly ignorant inventor of a new economical theory or a new political doctrine, or a new corner-stone for the fabric of society, can set on foot a movement from Maine to California, between two equinoxes, if he handles his invention with dexterity. This is what invests popular ignorance with terrors which never appeared in it before, and it is this which has brought the real, responsible test of democracy, social and political, on our time, and on us.

Democracy, in fact, has remained considerably, hitherto, an unworked theory of society,



even in communities which have supposed themselves to be democratically constituted. It has remained so through want of conditions that would give a clear sound to the individual voice and free play to the individual will. Those conditions are now arriving in the world, and the democratic régime is consequently perfecting itself, not politically alone, but economically, and in all the social relations of mankind.

So it is not exaggeration to say that we have come to a situation in which society must fight for its life against popular ignorance. The old agencies of education are inadequate, when the best has been made of them. The common school does not go far enough, and cannot. Its chief function is to prepare a soil in the young mind for the after seed-planting which will produce fruits of intelligence. Un-supplemented, it is well-nigh barren of true educational results. The higher schools and colleges reach too small a number to count for much in a problem which concerns the teaching of the universal millions. What agency, then, is there, that will prepare the democracy of the present and the future for its tremendous responsibilities?

Some may say, the newspaper press: and I would rejoice if we could accept that reply. For the press is an educating power that might transform the civilization of the world as swiftly in mind and morals as steam and electricity have transformed its material aspects. There is nothing conceivable in the way of light and leading for mankind which a conscientious and cultivated newspaper press might not do within a single generation. But a press of that character and that effect seems possible only under circumstances of disinterestedness which are not likely to exist. The publication of a newspaper may sometimes be undertaken as a duty, but not often. As a rule, it is a business, like any other, with the mercenary objects of business; and as a rule, too, the gain sought is more readily and more certainly found by pandering to popular ignorance than by striving against it. A few newspapers can secure a clientage which they please best by dignity, by cleanness, by sober truthfulness, and by thoughtful intelligence, in their columns; but the many are tempted always, not merely to stoop to low tastes and vulgar sentiments, but to cultivate them; because

there is gravitation in the moral as well as the physical world, and culture in the downward way is easier than in the upward.

The vulgarizing of the news press has been a late and rapid process, nearly coincident in cause and event with the evolution of this modern democracy which it makes more problematical. We need not be very old to have seen the beginnings: the first skimming of the rich daily news of the world for the scum and the froth of it; the first invention of that disgusting brew, from public sewers and private drains, with which the popular newspapers of the day feed morbid appetites. We can recall the very routes by which it was carried from city to city, and taken up by journal after journal, as they discovered a latent, undeveloped taste for such ferments of literature in the communities around them. The taste was latent, potential; it did not exist as a fact; it was not conscious of itself; it made no demands. The newspapers deliberately sought it out, delved for it, brought it to the surface; fed it, stimulated it, made it what it is to-day, an appetite as diseased and as shamefully pandered to as the appetite for intoxicating drinks.

And, so far as I can perceive, this action and reaction between what is ignorant and vulgar in the public and what is mercenary and unscrupulous in the press will go on until popular education from other sources puts an end to it. For it is the saving fact that there are other sources; and foremost among them are the public libraries. If it has been our privilege to see, and for some in our circle to bear a part in, the beginnings of the active educational work of the libraries, I am persuaded that it is only the beginnings we have witnessed as yet. I am persuaded that the public library of the future will transcend our dreams in its penetrating influence. Consider for a moment what it is, and what it offers to the energies of education which a desperate necessity is awakening and organizing in the world! It is a store, a reservoir, of the new knowledge of the latest day and the ripened wisdom of the long past. To carry into the memory and into the thought of all the people who surround it, in a town, even some little part of what it holds of instructed reasoning and instructed feeling, would be to civilize that community beyond the highest experience

of civilization that mankind has yet attained to. There is nothing that stands equally beside it as a possible agent of common culture. It is the one fountain of intellectual life which cannot be exhausted; which need not be channeled for any fortunate few; which can be generously led to the filling of every cup, of every capacity, for old or young. There is little in it to tempt the befouling hand of the politician, and it offers no gain to the mercantile adventurer. For those who serve it on behalf of the public there are few allurements of money or fame. Its vast powers for good are so little exposed to seduction or corruption that it seems to give promises for the future which are safer and surer than any others that society can build hopes upon.

In this view, those who serve the public libraries have a great responsibility laid on them. They hold in their hands what would give to civilization an ideal refinement if it could be distributed and communicated to all. As we know very well, that is impossible. There is a part of mankind, in every community, which never will feel, never can be made to feel, the gentle attractiveness and influence of books. The fact is one not to be disputed or ignored. At the same time it is a fact to be treated practically as though it did not exist. It is our business to assume that the mission of good books, books of knowledge, books of thought, books of inspiration, books of right feeling, books of wholesome imagination, can be pushed to every hearth, and to every child and parent who sits by it. And it is our business to labor unsparingly toward the making of that assumption good, without reckoning any fraction of hopelessness in it.

That is the business to which we are appointed in the world. Let us be careful that we do not misconceive it in one most important particular! It is not the mission of *books* that we are charged with, but the mission of *good books*. And there lies a delicate, difficult, very grave duty in that discrimination. To judge books with adequate knowledge and sufficient hospitality of mind; to exercise a just choice among them without offensive censorship; to defend his shelves against the endless siege of vulgar literature, and yet not waste his strength in the resistance—these are really the crucial demands made on every librarian.

For the first condition of successful work is a good tool; and our tools are not *books*, but *good books*. These given, then follow those demands on us which we sometimes discuss as though they came first of all: the demands, that is, for a perfected apparatus in the working library, for a tireless energy in its motive forces, and for a large intelligence in the directing of them.

Not many years ago, our missionary undertakings from the library seemed to be bounded by its own walls. The improving, annotating, and popularizing of catalogues; the printing and distributing of bulletins and reference lists; the surrounding of readers and seekers in a library with willing help and competent suggestion; these labors seemed, only a few years ago, to include almost everything that the librarian most zealous as a missionary could do. But see what doors have been opening in the last few years, and what illimitable fields of labor now invite him! Through one, the great army of the teachers in the common schools is coming into co-operation with him. Through another, he steps into the movement of university extension, and finds in every one of its servants a true apostle of the library mission of good books. From a third, he spreads his beneficent snares about a city in branches and delivery stations; and by a fourth he sends "traveling libraries" to the ends of his State.

The arena of our work is large enough already to make claims on every faculty and power we can bring to it; and yet our plainest duty is to enlarge it still. I think we may be sure that there are portals yet to open, agents yet to enlist, alliances yet to enter, conquests yet to make. And in the end—what?

Those of us who have faith in the future of democracy can only hold our faith fast by believing that the knowledge of the learned, the wisdom of the thoughtful, the conscience of the upright, will some day be common enough to prevail, always, over every factious folly and every mischievous movement that evil minds or ignorance can set astray. When that blessed time of victory shall have come, there will be many to share the glory of it; but none among them will rank rightly before those who have led and inspired the work of the public libraries.

## THE PRESENT PROBLEM.

BY WM. H. BRETT, LIBRARIAN OF THE CLEVELAND PUBLIC LIBRARY.

"THE old order changeth, giving place to the new, and God fulfils himself in many ways."

The period since the Civil War has been fraught with many changes in our own country. The United States of 1894 is not merely a greater and more populous, but a vastly different country from that of 1864.

The reasons for this are manifold. The emancipation and enfranchisement of an enslaved race, the influx of a large foreign population, the settlement and development of the West, the concentration of business of all kinds into great establishments, the shifting of population from the abandoned farm and the depleting village to the congesting city, all conspire, not merely to alter the circumstances but to radically change the very texture of our national life. With these changes has come an increasing hardness of the conditions of life for many classes of workmen, producing industrial discontent and growing antagonism between employers and employed; religious unrest evinced on the one hand by an apparently spreading skepticism, and on the other by the wonderful growth of the most earnest and enthusiastic associations for the spread of practical Christianity; political and social dissatisfaction leading to visionary political projects and the earnest advocacy of various social panaceas.

Amid all this turmoil, the great danger to our country, the danger which is fundamental to all the rest, is the failure of a large portion of our citizens to appreciate the importance of the duties of citizenship, and in the corruption of the ballot due to ignorance and vice. The growing complexity of political questions increases the difficulty. The young man of to-day may well envy the young man of "sixty-one" in that for him the issue was clearly made, the lines were sharply drawn, the path of duty was clearly marked.

The voter of to-day has to decide and act upon questions of the functions of government, of finance, of the tariff, about which the wisest disagree; and upon the decision of a voting

population which includes a formidable number of the corrupt, the venial and the ignorant, and a vast majority too meagrely informed, rests the welfare of our country. The remedy for this serious condition can only be found in more thorough and general education, with special emphasis upon the duties of citizenship and preparation for them.

The first to recognize the necessity of this more thorough political education were our colleges. This recognition was coincident with, or followed hard upon the Civil War, raising as it did so many new national and international questions. Since that time schools of political science have been made a part of the leading universities and colleges. Their graduates, largely engaged in teaching, or in journalism, and scattered throughout the country, form a leaven of sound political opinion.

The great Society of Christian Endeavor has paid especial attention to this subject and proposes as a most important part of its work during the coming year, while carefully avoiding any partisanship, to emphasize the importance of an intelligent and conscientious performance of civic duties. Clubs and associations are being formed throughout the country and journals published. While much of this effort is undoubtedly diverted from its legitimate purpose to the promotion of political schemes and the propaganda of new theories, it at least shows a widespread awakening to the importance of the subject.

In view of this serious condition, this pressing danger, this widespread interest, it is pertinent to enquire what our libraries are doing, what more they can do to ameliorate this condition, to avert this danger, to promote good citizenship. The growth of libraries in America during the last twenty years is unprecedented. The figures as set forth in the report of the Commissioner of Education are familiar to you. There were twelve millions of volumes in the libraries of the United States in 1876, thirty-two millions in 1892. It is difficult to discriminate, in the figures given in